

# The Christmas Belsnickle

by

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Antics, Belsnickles, Callithumpians, Fantasticals, and Mummers are names nearly forgotten. Yet they were once colorful and noisy additions to the celebration of Christmas and New Year's Day. Brought to this country by English and German settlers, these traditions have faded over time through acculturation.

Alfred L. Shoemaker in *Christmas in Pennsylvania: A Folk-Cultural Study* (1959), credits Episcopalians with bringing and fostering the mumming tradition to the Quaker city of Philadelphia. Originally a band of costumed and masked street thespians, they would present outdoor performances with the anticipation of monetary rewards. The costumes represented characters in a play, and were often satirical. The revelers were invited to share food and drink before traveling with their noisemakers and horns to the next household. Too many thespians, too many households, and too many drinks led to increased boisterous behavior, and city officials sought to ban the custom. When this mumming tradition was moved to New Year's Day, the performers were known as Antics, Callithumpians, Fantasticals, and Belsnickels. They were most often found in rural areas. However, Philadelphia remains the center for mummers and they are currently known for their string band music and fanciful costumes, as well as street theatrics.

Shoemaker and Snyder cite newspaper accounts beginning in the 1830s, and continuing well into the 1900s. Locally, Antics, Callithumpians, and Fantasticals appeared annually on New Year's Day in Paxtonville, according to Fay McAfee Winey, in an 1970 article published in *Pennsylvania Folklife*. Residents would toil for days, crafting costumes to mask their identity, even from their own children. They would go to the train station, mill around, and tempt travelers to try and to guess their true identities. Often, they would ride the train to Beavertown, presumably continuing their high jinks, and return on the next scheduled run. It appears the children were left in the hands of neighbors who

abstained from the good-natured fun. Winey said that the day was also known as Belsnickling Day. It was apparently an attempt to hide from the dreaded Belsnickle, who would return that day to see if you were still being good. Winey writes it was really a day set aside to break rules and have fun. She states that one young lady got the tongue lashing of her life at bedtime, because she recognized her mother at the train station, sharing the news with the crowd. Winey's familiarity with the custom suggests she, too, might have been a participant.



Belsnickle as drawn by R. D. Dunkleberger. *Christmas in Pennsylvania; a Folk-Cultural Study* by Alfred L. Shoemaker, p. 75. The Pennsylvania Folklife Society Collection at Ursinus College. Used with permission.

In addition to masked and costumed participants performing at the train station, groups of masked men (often black-faced) would gallop about the countryside blowing horns, frightening children by riding close to schools (if in session), sledding, or ice skating. This was accompanied by the threat that the Belsnickle would put you in his sack and carry you off. Reports of this practice are found in newspapers from Danville, New Berlin, and Montour. Many editors, though not all, also expressed relief when the custom ceased and the day became “moderate, pleasant and decorous.”

Clair Groover recalled riding about the Union County countryside from farm to farm, with masked and costumed friends, just for “devilment”. They too, carried horns and noisemakers.

However, the Belsnickle or Pelsnickle (Nicholas in furs) has a more complex history. Noted Christmas historian Phillip Snyder, in December 25th The Joys of Christmas Past (1985) reported the appearance of Belsnickle in German celebrations, but gives no details of its antecedents. Speculation holds that Rupert, the groom that attended Saint Nicholas, became the Belsnickle when Protestants rejected Nicholas. Yet it is only speculation. His appearance and mission varied from time to time and from community to community. Dressed in ragged clothes, ratty furs, and many times black-faced, he traveled alone about the countryside. Sometimes, he came on Saint Nicholas Day (December 6). It was said that if you were not good you would be carried away in his sack and children cringed when they heard the bells signaling his approach. I believe it was a very clever way to reinforce the “you’d better be good” refrain of parents prior to the holidays.

Traditionally, he came at Christmastime. Harold Danowsky remembered well his annual visit in Kelly Township. He would rattle his chains and thump on the door. An adult would offer him entrance, while the children scurried to hide behind their mother (or whatever furniture was available). The forbidding figure would toss coveted sweets and nuts on the floor, requesting information as to who had been good, and who had not. Harold recalled being unable to resist the temptation to snatch sweets, prior to being granted permission. He recounted crawling under the copper wash kettle lid and scuttling in turtle fashion to the center of the room, grabbing what he could, while being protected from the forcible lashing of the switch (delivered by the Belsnickle). Most often, the masked and costumed figure was a relative or friend.

In some communities, Belsnickle was the gift-giver as well as the enforcer, bringing either presents or lumps of coal in stockings, for those whose behavior merited one or the other. He remained a person to be pleased, just like our modern day, Santa Claus.

Henry Harbaugh, a Lewisburg minister, extolled the joys of Christmas

celebrations in his publication, "The Guardian." For years he tried convincing Protestant churches to incorporate secular aspects of the holiday into church activities. He wrote plays for Sunday school performances, songs and poetry. According to George Folkers, a Bucknell language professor, it was a poorly written sort of poetry, translated below by Folkers. In this poem, Harbaugh's description of a Belsnickle visit, closely parallels Danowsky's story:

O, do you know that ugly, dirty fellow?  
 Brr! Is he supposed to be human?  
 Whoever can believe that he is human, can do so,  
 To me, he resembles too closely the Evil one!

Just look at his eyes, his nose-good Lord!  
 He opens and closes his mouth like a pair of scissors;  
 He has a tail like a steer, that he does,  
 And a hairy pelt like a bear.

If he comes to your house, there'll be noise enough,  
 He'll be looking for good-for-nothing children!  
 And when he finds one, he comes at once to the point,  
 And thrashes quite thoroughly the sinners.

He takes up a position with his fearsome cane  
 And roars his threatening words;  
 The children become quite suddenly good  
 And begin fervently to pray.

If one is, as most often the case, mischievous-  
 If little Fritz mocks his mother;  
 I'll bet, he won't laugh at Belsnickel's cane  
 He'll beg soon for a change in the weather.

Now Belsnickel's violently shaking his bag  
 Cakes and nuts must fall from it,  
 Good children can take them, bad ones get whacked  
 By Belsnickel's cane where it does good.

I've learned something from old Belsnickel  
 And that I will never forget:  
 As you sow, so shall you reap  
 The fruits of your labor at last.

Another Belsnickling custom prevailed in rural areas until the late 1930s, or perhaps into the 1940s. Groups of young people would dress in costumes and masks to hide their identities. It was common for boys to represent girls and vice versa. So attired, they would call on neighbors to see if they could fool them. Invited in for cookies, popcorn, cakes and cider, the masked visitors would enjoy themselves while the guessing games continued. These social visits were greatly anticipated during the holidays.

One visit in New Berlin caused great excitement. While cleaning up after the departure of visitors, a widow discovered a man's hat in her parlor. Where was the man, she wondered? She searched high and low, but could not locate the owner. Afraid, she remained awake that evening, fearing the worst. The next day, she repeated the search, and had another sleepless night. By the third day, her neighbor noticed she was missing, called on her friend, and found her both exhausted and frantic. The fearful widow explained the source of her angst, producing the hat. "My Goodness!" the neighbor exclaimed, "That is my husband Henry's hat. Sally wore it out belsnickeling this week." This custom of visiting while in costume, continued in rural areas of Pennsylvania until the 1930s, and was called belsnickling. Spirited young participants were referred to as belsnicklers.

Some of these holiday traditions overlapped into other seasons. Therefore, when you open your door to trick-or-treaters on Halloween, you are also participating in a tradition dating back hundreds of years.

### **Sources:**

- Shoemaker, Alfred L.  
1959 *Christmas in Pennsylvania: A Folk-Cultural Study*. Folklore Society.
- Snyder, Phillip  
1985 *December 25th The Joys of Christmas Past*. Dodd-Mead.

